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## Beyond the Masculine: Liberating Gender through God-Talk

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Sarah Dischinger

### **Beyond the Masculine: Liberating Gender through God-Talk**

“...if God is male, then male is God.”<sup>1</sup>

“We have created a false god and substituted ‘him’ for the true God of Judaeo-Christian revelation.”<sup>2</sup>

“To encapsulate God into any single gender identity or sexual expression limits the possibilities of God’s manifestations in humanity”<sup>3</sup>

#### **Introduction**

As a gender studies student I long for a world/society where people are liberated from “correct” ways to do gender. Gender studies has informed me that models of gender within modern society are often determined as correct or incorrect depending on whether or not they align with hegemonic models of gender which usually exist within a gender-binary, heterosexual, patriarchal way. Women’s studies and feminist scholars have historically sought ways to liberate women. Eventually, in partnership with queer theorist there was a push to use gender studies to liberate all marginalized groups. This manifested in helping these groups gain recognition and fullness as a human people in culture and under the law.

As a theology student, I have learned that the Christian interpretation of identity and morality permeates society whether we like it or not. I have noticed that the way the images and metaphors for God have been circulated and used within culture have perpetuated the stereotypical male-masculine metaphor for the Divine. Through several feminist, queer and

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<sup>1</sup> Mary F. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973):19

<sup>2</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders. *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*. (New York: Paulist, 1986): 29.

<sup>3</sup> B.K. Hipsher and Lisa Isherwood. "God Is a Many Gendered Thing: An Apophatic Journey to Pastoral Diversity." In *Trans/formations*, 92-104. (London: SCM Press, 2009): 99

womanist theologians I have found that regardless of whether or not people are critically aware of the way that they identify God, the image of God functions in their lives and in society.<sup>4</sup> I have observed how masculine and male centered models of God have fueled patriarchal and binary gender relations within society.

## **Thesis**

Thus in this paper, I employ Cynthia Enloe's concept of "feminist curiosity"<sup>5</sup> in conjunction with feminist, womanist, and queer theology to explore different metaphors of God that move outside a patriarchal context. I hold that by imagining God outside of patriarchal and masculine models there will be more space for relationship with the Divine and for a more liberated view of gender.

What we imagine God to be is frequently dictated and moderated by the society that we live in and how we understand ourselves within that society. Cultural norms around the male naming of God have been forming since early Christianity. The adoption of the male metaphor as a literal interpretation of God took hold and is reflected now in biblical writing and interpretation.<sup>6</sup> However, the Catechism of the Catholic Church also incites a call to the members of the Church: "God transcends all creatures. We must therefore continually purify our language of everything in it that is limited, image- bound or imperfect, if we are not to confuse our image of God..."<sup>7</sup> Even still, the Catechism insists through example that masculine pronouns and language are the singular way to address God and people (i.e. he, him, his, man's duty, etc.).

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson. "Introduction: To Speak Rightly of God." *In She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992): 6

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Enloe. "Introduction." Pp 1-7 in *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 3

<sup>6</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders. *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*. (New York: Paulist, 1986): 28.

<sup>7</sup> "How Can We Speak About God?" *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994.

“We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.”

What I propose is that we take to the challenge that the Catechism has given us and resist the radically singular masculine metaphors and images for a beautiful mess of all varieties of metaphors. That is to say, confuse the image one-gender God in order to perpetuate a holy transcendence of the human form. I take guidance from feminist theologies that are formed from the ideology of feminism(s) or that women have historically dealt with oppression and feminism(s) seek liberation because of such oppression. Feminist theologies specifically seek to deal with inequality specifically in terms of Christianity and structures within Christianity. I take guidance from Elizabeth Johnson, Virginia Mollenkott, and Sandra Schneiders whose mission it is to show women that God is not inherently male nor female. I take guidance from Marcella Althaus-Reid, B.K. Hipsher, and Susannah Cornwall who aim to tell the world that the imaged of God can, indeed, be queered. Finally, I am inspired by all the innovative models that I have encountered through the journey to write this paper by people who sought to relate to God.

I must address before the rest of this paper that there is no inherent issue in calling God by masculine terms. However, when hegemonic masculinity in our culture continues to be that of domination, violence, and power and when we associate God with that masculinity it creates an erroneous and limiting image of God for us. When the masculine metaphors become the exclusive discourse for God, then we have reached a point of issue. By giving God female and non-binary metaphors perhaps the Christian society will become more open and willing to accept the inherent dignity and divinity of each person due to *imago dei*. They will be able to listen with less ambivalence to the Gospel and Biblical narratives that involve women and marginalized peoples and overall marginalized people will be able to be more important members in the

Church and have more agency within that institution. “There are ways of thinking we don’t yet know about. There are ways of speaking about God we don’t yet know about.”<sup>8</sup> This is to say that there are so many identities of God to uncover and explore, we cannot limit ourselves to just the few and the comfortable.

## Background

I want to clarify some of the terminology and concepts I will be using throughout this discussion. One of the critical ideas that I employ in my research is that all human beings are made in *imago dei* meaning “The dignity of the human person is rooted in [their] creation in the image and likeness of God”<sup>9</sup> That said, I hold that by using a variety of different names and metaphorical images for God we will be able to reflect more widely who can see themselves in the *imago dei*. This means that people of all gender identities will be able to understand themselves as part of the divine image and be able to establish a better relationship with the divine.

The aforementioned Enloe-coined terminology of “feminist curiosity” is a way to develop a critical feminist lens and as Enloe states “One of the starting points of feminism is taking women’s lives seriously. ‘Seriously’ implies listening carefully, digging deep, developing a long attention span, being ready to be surprised.”<sup>10</sup> In essence, a feminist curiosity is calling out systems that we have too long taken for granted and viewed as the norm. However, in the spirit of current manifestations of gender theory and feminist theory I intend to expand my

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson. “Introduction: To Speak Rightly of God.” 13

<sup>9</sup> “The Dignity of the Human Person,” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Enloe. “Introduction.” Pp 1-7 in *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004): 3

definition of feminist curiosity to encompass other groups of people who are marginalized on the basis of gender identity. This means I will be searching for additional metaphors and examples of God-talk that are inclusive of trans, gender fluid, and gender non-conforming folks.

When referring to “space” in the context of this paper I allude to the idea that a patriarchal, masculine model of God is constricting and limiting in reference to those who can or more importantly cannot relate to this model of God. This can be seen in work done by a significant number of feminist theologians who have been doing work to expand God-talk to specifically include feminine models of God. Elizabeth Johnson asserts that the way we refer to God has more than just “Ivory Tower” academic implications. Rather it is a “movement with roots deep in the human spirit. Women, long considered less than adequate human persons, claim themselves as active subjects of history and name toward God out of this emerging identity, to practical and critical effect.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, creating space for new models of God manifests as calling out the overuse of masculine models and creating a real widespread praxis of more diverse God-talk in order for more people to see themselves in the *imago dei* and feel like they can create a more meaningful relationship with the Divine.

### **Masculine Metaphors and God-Talk**

“I believe in one God, the Father almighty... I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages... begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation...”<sup>12</sup>

Prayer and how we say our prayers, write our prayers, and continue to take them for granted should be a key indicator of what the prevalent view of God is within a particular Christian society. The Nicene Creed, parts of which have been listed above is filled with

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson. "Introduction: To Speak Rightly of God": 5

<sup>12</sup> "What We Believe." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/>.

“Father” language. This prayer is considered an essential litany of central beliefs within the Catholic faith. Therefore, if our language reflects only masculine and paternal images of the Godhead and the Divine, it can lead a body of believers, especially ones that aren’t educated in the theology of God-talk, that God is male. The Nicene Creed isn’t the only place where it is perpetuated that God is indeed the Father. The Sign of the Cross which is practiced by Catholic believers is a sort of physical prayer and what some may call a “mini creed.” If one were to conduct the Sign of the Cross and orally follow along, it begins with “In the name of the Father...”<sup>13</sup> The Sign of the Cross is done several times in a single Sunday mass and innumerable times during the lifetime of a practicing Catholic. The concept that is being introduced here is the idea that, regardless of the theological teaching that God is transcendent of all human metaphor and language.

“Since our knowledge of God is limited, our language about him is equally so. We can name God only by taking creatures as our starting point, and in accordance with our limited human ways of knowing and thinking.”<sup>14</sup>

However, the Catechism does remain a culturally-affected model of the image of God as it is rife with masculine and male language which signals to the reader this continuity with male language and, no matter how subconsciously, the reader will understand the Being of God as a masculine entity. Elizabeth Johnson says in *Quest for the living God*: “As hallowed by tradition and currently used, all-male images of God are hierarchical images rooted in the unequal relation between women and men, they function to maintain this arrangement.”<sup>15</sup> Not only does the

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<sup>13</sup> Bert Ghezzi. "Why Catholics Make the Sign of the Cross." OSV Newsweekly. January 23, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “How Can We Speak About God?” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014): 96.

symbol of God function, but it functions as a perpetuation of harmful power arrangements that continue to oppress women, gender non-conforming, and non-binary folks today.

What does the Bible itself have to say about the masculine and fatherly patriarch that society has now created out of God? Sandra Schneiders in her book *Women and the Word* begins to unpack the biblical language and metaphors for God in the Old and New Testaments. She bases her work off of the idea “How women experience themselves in relation to God, Christ, and Church is profoundly affected by the imputed masculinity of God which is operative in the imaginations of both male and female believers.”<sup>16</sup> In the Old Testament we are presented with several different images for the Godhead. Schneiders presents readers with the four different ways that God had been referred to in the Old Testament: literal language, specific names for God, personifications, and metaphor.<sup>17</sup> As she goes onto explore the different ways, she finds that the literal naming methods for God were never sexed or gendered (i.e. “covenant-maker” and “restorer”).<sup>18</sup> The specific names for God include Exodus 3:14 “I am who I am” which in and of itself was not assigned a gender signifier.<sup>19</sup> The two personifications for God, “Wisdom” and “Shekinah” are both commonly “presented as feminine both grammatically and rhetorically.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, we have the representation of God in metaphors where we can find most of the pervasive fatherhood and masculinized language.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders. *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*. (New York: Paulist, 1986): 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 20-26.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 25-26.



While the Father language is used, it isn't used exclusively. In fact, maternal language and metaphors are used sporadically within the Hebrew text, though the masculine far outnumbers the feminine metaphors. An example of the feminine:

“In Isaiah 66:13 God says to Israel, ‘As one whom his mother comforts so I will comfort you.’ In Psalm 131:2 the psalmist says of reliance on God, ‘I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother’s breast’”<sup>22</sup>

In the New Testament, we see a larger struggle for the understanding of God and gender through how Jesus identifies with the Godhead frequently referring in the New Testament to God as “Father.” Sandra Schneiders explores the different examples of how Jesus interacts with God and how God is presented in the New Testament. While Jesus’s use of fatherly metaphors and names for God may call into question the true identity of God, we must always refer to the idea that God as just “father” is far too anthropocentric and relates too exclusively to the human being. When in reality God is Being. God is far more than humanity can comprehend.

Schneiders through her research comes to three conclusions. The first is that “in Jesus’s culture the father-son metaphor was the only one capable of carrying the meaning of his integral involvement in the work of salvation originated by God.”<sup>23</sup> She comes to this conclusion from the theory of the secret parable that is a father training his son into his trade. This could not be a functioning parable if the explicit image of God was a mother or a woman, because in the time Jesus existed women were not allowed to hold trades or exist in the public sphere as women do today.<sup>24</sup> The second conclusion comes from the parable of the prodigal son in. Jesus uses this parable and the intimate use of the word Abba when referring to God in order to overthrow the patriarchal interpretation of God the Father that existed in that time. The parable of the Prodigal

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 43.

Son in and of itself overthrows the idea of patriarchal fatherhood because instead of a stern and correctional father, Jesus presents a father that runs to his son who has wronged him in so many ways and embraces him, and that is how he presents God. This idea completely overthrows a cultural idea of God as an overbearing correctional father and instead presents one of radical love.<sup>25</sup> Finally, through the same parable Jesus “delegitimizes human patriarchy by invalidating its appeal to the divine institution.”<sup>26</sup> This essentially means that through subverting the normative view of a patriarchal, Jesus is overthrowing dominant culture and implanting the idea that there is another, better, more loving way to be a father.

A legitimate question lies with the gender of Jesus, and his incarnation into man. While this brings in far more complexity into the issue, and more interesting research, for the sake of this paper I will not be diving into the incarnate manhood and humanity of Jesus, rather just the metaphors for the Godhead.

The questions then arise: How and why did culture and society cling so desperately to the masculine metaphors and quietly leave the maternal and feminine metaphors that exist in the text? Schneiders stated in her discourse on God in the Old Testament:

“The masculine God-image is due largely to the interplay between the repression of the feminine on one hand and the use of male metaphors on the other. As we have tried to suggest, the repression of the feminine was due to sociological and political interests in supporting the patriarchy and a theological concern to safeguard the transcendent monotheism of Israel.”<sup>27</sup>

This concept of exacerbating and using the masculine metaphors for God continues and whether it is due to complacency or an active use in order to continue the support of patriarchal systems, it is harmful. As Elizabeth Johnson never lets us forget, “The symbol of God

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 24.

functions.”<sup>28</sup> As we continue to look into the idea of how the symbol of God functions, we will look at how male metaphors for God have historically marginalized women. However, I intend to use the research that is already in place to show that the God-symbol functions to marginalize women, and to show how it also marginalizes other gender groups like trans and non-binary folks.

What effects does the male metaphor of God have on our society? When a culture adopts and adheres to only a few metaphors of God, the objects/concepts on both sides of the metaphor get lifted up and treated as divine. Johnson says it well, “The human reality used to point to God becomes by that very act consecrated, revealed in its holy depths.”<sup>29</sup> When men and the masculine are the primary active metaphor for God, and all the rest seem deviant<sup>30</sup> men and the masculine are lifted to deity status and become the standard for society. Patriarchy is dependent on the fact that men and hegemonic masculinity are superior to all other genders and sexes. Famous feminist scholar and theorist bell hooks says in the beginning of her book *Feminism is for Everybody*:

“Since our society continues to be primarily a "Christian" culture, masses of people continue to believe that god has ordained that women be subordinate to men in the domestic household. Even though masses of women have entered the workforce, even though many families are headed by women who are the sole breadwinners, the vision of domestic life which continues to dominate the nation's imagination is one in which the logic of male domination is intact, whether men are present in the home or not.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson. "Introduction: To Speak Rightly of God." *In She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992): 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>31</sup> bell hooks. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000): 2

This belief is founded in the theory that if men are raised to the level of gods and deities then society will reflect that idea. Thus, we can refer back to Mary Daly's very simple quote, "...if God is male, then male is God."<sup>32</sup>

### **Feminism, Womanism, and Queer Theologies**

Several branches of theology and feminism have been starting to take on the task of questioning the Church and the masculine, patriarchal and heteronormative tendencies of the Church. It only makes sense that as women began to take their place in academia and the church, (slowly) questions started to arise about why God was only referred to as "he, him, and his." Since female theologians have started asking questions and posing alternatives, queer and LGTBQ theologies have followed suit. Slowly but surely questioning the structures that have deified certain gender identities and marginalized others have been called into question. In this section I will briefly discuss the theologies that have been key in reforming how we view God and relate to God.

Feminist theology in particular is concerned with women's liberation from structures such as the patriarchy and sexism. One of the initial goals of some feminist scholars was to take the Bible and revamp the religious text in a way that was more applicable to women.<sup>33</sup> Feminist theologians were some of the first to begin to question exclusive language being used by the Church in religious texts and practices. Exclusive language in the Church doesn't only pertain to referring to God exclusively in the masculine, but also encompasses the use of "men" in referring to congregations and the body of Christ. "To that end, some feminist theologians have begun

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<sup>32</sup> Mary F. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973):19

<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Chabot and Sarah Neely, "Feminist Liberative Theologies," in *Introducing Liberative Theologies*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015): 177.

creating new language and terms or reappropriating and redefining terms to use when doing theological reflection.”<sup>34</sup> Many feminist theologians have adopted the use of Goddess, mother, Shekinah (a feminine term for God used by Jewish rabbis in the first or second century B.C.E.<sup>35</sup>), or adopted the use of Sophia (or wisdom) in reference to not only the Holy Spirit but to God. Feminist theology, especially early branches, have often looked like Liberal Feminism, which is notable for the way it created the concept of “adding women into stir” as a solution. We can see this theory enacted through the proposition of adding female language for God. While this may be one piece of the puzzle, neither original feminist theology nor liberal feminism prove to be the full solution.

That said, “[m]any early feminists focused solely on gender, failing to take into account the diversity of woman-kind and how those who are not white and middle- or upper-class experience many of these same issues differently.”<sup>36</sup> This is why I also take guidance from womanist and queer theologies.

Womanism is a movement specifically surrounding the oppression and inequality that black women face. This theology is focused on giving black and African American women a voice to speak their truth.<sup>37</sup> Womanism is enlightening on the journey toward a more liberating view of God by being a reminder that we cannot forget about race and culture and all of the intersections of identity that make up a person.

“Catholic womanist theologians seek to explore the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion in an effort to reveal the role the Christian religion, especially Roman Catholicism, has played in affirming, exploiting, perpetuating,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Virginia R Mollenkott. *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1983): 36.

<sup>36</sup> Rebecca Chabot and Sarah Neely, "Feminist Liberative Theologies," in *Introducing Liberative Theologies*, ed Miguel A. De La Torre (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015): 172.

<sup>37</sup> Diana L. Hayes, "Faith of Our Mothers: Catholic Womanist God-Talk," in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009): 135.

and upholding understandings of social constructs that have served to provide not only a language but a pervasive, hegemonic ethos of subordination and oppression of women and persons of color.”<sup>38</sup>

While the intent of this paper is to focus on gender, I will not turn a blind eye to the fact that race and gender are intimately tied and do not exist without each other, and womanism provides an invaluable context for that idea.

The final theology that I take guidance and inspiration from is Queer Theology. Queer Theology stems from Queer Theory. Queer Theory calls into question commonly held truths. In one article about Gay/Lesbian and Queer Theologies, the author, Mary Elise Lowe, says, “Queer theorists deconstruct meaning itself and argue that all meaning—whether it be words in a sentence, a truth claim, or the identity of a person—is constructed out of relationships of difference.”<sup>39</sup> Queer Theory considers what the people in the center of society take for granted as “truth” and queer it, disrupt it to challenge society’s perceptions. Queer Theory considers gender a construct and does what it can in order to disrupt heteronormative cisgender norms. Queer theology looks to do the same within the theological world. I take guidance from the idea of queering the norm with Queer Theology and creating space for LGBTQ+, non-binary, and gender non-conforming folks. Theology and Christianity are spaces in which queer voices have not been heard, and in fact it’s a place that queer people have historically been even unable to enter. I take guidance and inspiration from the theologians that put themselves and their identities out into their research in order to advocate for queer Christians everywhere.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Elise Lowe. 2009. “Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theologies: Origins, Contributions, and Challenges.” *Dialog* 48 (1): 52.

## Alternative Metaphors for God

The idea of pulling together true and just models of God in order for people to see themselves reflected in the *imago dei* is something that these various theologians have been doing over the years. I believe that we have much to learn from these theologians in the mainstream and within congregational settings. The solution I then propose is that we refocus our attention on models of God that venture outside of the masculine model. I will reiterate that the masculine model of God in and of itself is not wrong or incorrect. The overuse and perpetuation, however, especially when the theological teaching is that singular metaphors for God are incomplete, is incorrect. Especially if we are obliged to understand God outside of hegemonic masculinity. We have created a culture in which God is male. The emotional and cultural association with this God is domineering and all-powerful. When we assign one set of anthropomorphic traits to God without question, we are limiting the reality of God which is limitless and unbounded by human language, identities, and ideas. The reality that we cannot comprehend is that God is not a human being. God is not a being that we have the language for. Therefore, through research and reiteration of the voices that have sought newer more inclusive metaphors for God, I hope to show how important and imperative this issue is, especially in a historically patriarchal Christianity and society. However, regardless of the metaphors that these acclaimed theologians or I propose, we must recognize that God is not any which one of these, but rather these are peepholes that we can use to glimpse the bits of the truth of God.

One of the most classic ways that has been used by feminist scholars to reclaim God is to use female and mother language in reference to God. While, as we learned from Schneiders, the Bible isn't a stranger to the use of feminine metaphors it seems like Christian culture as we know

it--is. Virginia Mollenkott has authored a small text that serves as a reference to several different ways that God has been and can be referred to in the feminine. The most appealing perhaps for the sake of this argument are the Mother metaphors that stand, in what would seem like, direct opposition to that of the Father metaphors and language that have pervaded Christianity and its liturgy.

The first metaphor that Mollenkott presents in the line of Mother and maternal models is “The Godhead as a Woman in the Process of Giving Birth.”<sup>40</sup> In this section, Mollenkott talks about the several ways God has been referred to as a mother who has given birth. She says that this metaphor has been used in several different ways and can be interpreted as such. For instance, the use of the image of God as a mother giving birth is an image that is life-giving, but it is also an image that is no stranger to pain. In reference to Isaiah 42:14 where God is seen being imagined like woman in labor, Mollenkott writes “Powerfully, God’s anguish at the human failure to embody justice is captured in the image of a woman writhing, unable to catch her breath in the pain of her travail. This image makes God seem very much present alongside all those who are oppressed by the turmoil and suffering of our world.”<sup>41</sup> She goes on to pick up other references from the Bible, specifically Paul whom she said is no stranger to seeing God as both masculine and feminine according to his Jewish education which didn’t exclusively use masculine language (ex. Shekinah and YHWH).<sup>42</sup> The chapter talks about several instances in which we see the creation of humanity being birthed from the womb of God. While, there are frequently not direct references to God as Mother, the insinuation of possession of a womb alone

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<sup>40</sup> Virginia R Mollenkott. *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1983): 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 16.



is enough for scholars like Mollenkott to use these womb-metaphors as Mother metaphors. An example of such as verse demonstrating womb language can be seen in Job 38 as God speaks to Job in reference to the Creation:

“Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? When I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped?”” (NRSV)

One of the other major uses of birth in the Bible in John 16 is when Jesus compares his death on the cross to the hour in which a woman births her child. “A woman, he said, has sorrow when her *hour is come* and her birth contractions begin, but later her sorrow is turned to joy by the actual arrival of the baby.”<sup>43</sup> God in the mother-giving-birth metaphor is seen as a life-giving and powerful force. This power is different and unlike the dominating power that we see within several masculine metaphors. It is derived from love rather than domination and sustains power through life and love rather than death.

The other major biblical metaphor that Mollenkott presents is that of the “Nursing Mother”<sup>44</sup> The image of the people of God at the breast appears several times in the Bible from Isaiah and Number to John and 1 Peter. One of the difficulties of this metaphor that makes evident the discomfort of referring to God as anything but “he” is the use of the breastfeeding metaphor in reference to God while still using male pronouns.

While it’s important to be careful that we know now that people of a variety of people despite their anatomy can prefer any pronoun they like, I think it’s interesting that despite the fact that breastfeeding and mothering was a stereotypical female task Biblical writers attribute it to a male God. Mollenkott comments, “We might be wise to avoid sex-specific pronouns when

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 20.

speaking about a God who is simultaneously *both* male and female, and *neither* male nor female.”

Motherly and maternal images of God are important and prolific for modern society because it renews a memory of a God that wasn't always patriarchal and masculine within society. It is important to continue to add these metaphors into the repertoire of the Church to reinvigorate the identity of those that identify as female. However, these aren't the only ways we can refer to God. My goal is to stray away from a Liberal Feminist view of “adding women into the stir” when it comes to showcasing and developing new ideas for God. Yes, it will be extremely productive to *begin* to say “She” in reference to God in Catholic mass, but it will be even more productive to say “She” and “They.” In a tribute essay to Marcella Althaus-Reid, Susannah Cornwall deals with this same issue whilst arguing for the Queer God.

“For many Christians, however, the heterosexual male God is still so ubiquitous that even a suggestion that God can be addressed as Mother as well as Father is staggeringly disturbing and radical. I entirely agree with Althaus-Reid that such a move is not far-reaching enough; but it might still be a *necessary* move as human society makes its journey out of its own static sexedness as well as God's.”<sup>45</sup>

The following models of God are not for a sort of lukewarm introduction into the use of new language and metaphor for God. Rather they are radical moves to incorporate communities that have been marginalized in such a way that these models might seem ludicrous. Frankly, that's the point. We need to move past the point of shock and dismay to the point where there is a real acceptance for all sorts of metaphors for a God that defies them all.

Marcella Althaus-Reid who coined Indecent Theology to bring a new edge to the field, uses Queer Theology to portray an image of God that is translatable to LGBTQ people and

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<sup>45</sup> Cornwall, Susannah. "Stranger in Our Midst: The Becoming of the Queer God in the Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid." In *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2010: 102.

people who identify as queer. In her book *The Queer God*, she essentially poses the question of: What do we do when the Church and the image of God we see doesn't fit us because our identity lies outside of "the norm" or what is acceptable? What if the love that we give and receive looks different but it's still love? "Bodies in love add many theological insights to the quest for God and truth, but doing theology from other contexts needs to consider the experiences and reflection of Others too"<sup>46</sup> Binary and heteronormative language is still pervasive within theology and Christian culture, that being said if we truly believe that humans are made *imago dei* then we must consider queer LGBTQ folks as well. Althaus Reid poses the model of God coming out of the closet.<sup>47</sup> This can be understood as God revealing Godself truly to humanity. If we image a God that can sympathize with the struggles of the queer community, namely, having been previously identified as one thing and coming out as another, then this opens a new way to dialogue with God. Not only does the Coming-Out-God stand for the experience that humans can relate back to, but it literally stands for the idea that the Judeo-Christian God, for thousands of years, has been primarily known in masculine and heterosexual terms, this provides a new door for us to experience God in more ways than our mind can imagine.

Relatedly, Reverend B.K. Hipsher partakes in an exploration of gender and God. Hipsher sets up an apophatic journey, or a journey of explicitly what God is not, in order to come to a conclusion of an appropriate and full way to refer to God. "I believe we are compelled to image God in the ever-changing, shifting, diverse, and multiple transgender realities that human beings embody."<sup>48</sup> Hipsher's journey starts with what they believe God is not. The first thing God is not is: male. Hipsher's journey through God-as-Male essentially comes to a head with the idea that

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<sup>46</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge 2003), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>48</sup> B.K. Hipsher and Lisa Isherwood. "God Is a Many Gendered Thing: An Apophatic Journey to Pastoral Diversity." In *Trans/formations*, 92-104. (London: SCM Press, 2009): 99

male God language just far too perpetuated and too many harmful systems have been imposed by the Western world due to the patriarchy. God as masculine is perpetuated by and gives benefit to white, heterosexual people of privilege.<sup>49</sup> “We must first understand that God is not exclusively defined by the Western patriarchal image of white, male, heterosexual, educated, middle- and upper-class people without physical, mental or emotional challenges.”<sup>50</sup>

Hipsher then moves through the God-as-Female imagery. The critique behind this model of God is simply that “shifting to female images of God or including female images of God reinforces a binary gender construct that supports normative heterosexuality and elevates it to the position of the divine nature of human beings.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the image of God must move beyond the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality constructed by humanity and perpetuated by patriarchy that keeps humans locked in gender roles<sup>52</sup> and accept models that are liberated of heteronormativity.

We then move with Hipsher to the idea of God as Gay or Lesbian. While this model begins to transgress the compulsory heterosexuality of society it also limits and excludes the experience of bisexual, transgender or other gender non-conforming folks.<sup>53</sup> So what about a Transgender God? While Hipsher does conclude that the Transgender model helps us move toward completeness of God and human expression: “We must be critical enough to open up the possibilities for human expression to include the full range and fluidity of human sexuality and sexual expression and embrace the concept of surgical and hormonal gender reassignment.”<sup>54</sup> They also state that, “It is precisely because a transgender image of God is so unsettling to most

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 97.

people that we are compelled to argue for it...But is an image of a transgender God still too limiting, too small, to hold the God of the universe? The simple answer is yes.”<sup>55</sup> Though this still isn’t complete enough for Hipsher.

Hipsher’s final movement and ultimate idea is that of a *Trans*-God. This God does not necessarily embody a singular experience of gender or sexual expression. That is the apophatic nature of this version of God. Hipsher argues that woman, man, or some combination of them isn’t enough. Rather, the *trans*-God is a holistic expression of what the name of God should do.

“[A *trans*-God] that *transgresses* all our ideas about who and what God is and can be, one that *transports* us to new possibilities for how God can incarnate in the multiplicity of human embodiments, one that *transfigures* our mental images from limitations, one that *transforms* our ideas about our fellow humans and ourselves, one that *transcends* all we know or think we know about God and about humanity as the *imago dei*.”<sup>56</sup>

This version of God is always in flux and in flow. This God can take on the image of one thing or metaphor but constantly flow and transition. Hipsher lays out the pathway to realizing a *trans*-God: 1) We must tear down the male image God that has been perpetuated to mobilize hate and intolerance in our communities. 2) We have to accept the possibility of a *trans*-God which is a concept that thus far lives outside what many people understand as possible or true. Finally, 3) we must confront the reality of ourselves. For Hipsher, this often means a journey to the discovery of one’s gender or sexual preference, disregarding what we think we are supposed to be.<sup>57</sup> Only if we understand that regardless of who we are, how we identify, and how we love we are made in the radical love of the *imago dei*, only then will we begin to live in the peace, love and mystery of the *trans*-God.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 100-101.

## Developing My Own Model

Amidst the journey through other theologians' models of God, I was struck by the realization that I must have a metaphor or a version of God that I intimately love and relate to or perhaps can learn from. To be frank, I am angry. I am angry with the Church only talking about God as a man. I look at the church, the Catholic Church in particular and never see myself represented. I had always struggled with the idea of God being a man. I remember in high school pushing back on every assertion from other teens that God was a man. I didn't know that God. Whenever I imagined God as a man, I heard James Earl Jones's voice in my head speak back to my prayers in my head. No. That was not my God. Perhaps, it was God as a woman or a mother or a grandmother. That was just as limiting to me as God as an old white man in the sky. It made me think of my own mom and while I love my own mother, I couldn't get over the image and the concept of my deified mom.

Then, I considered God as a Drag Queen. This was an interesting thought. Drag queens emulate beauty, but they are also in a way--too much. They are too much woman, yet still man. They hang in the balance between both. The thing about this version is that it incited confusion and mystery in me. From this movement I was reminded that my view of God had to be moving and confusing in order for us to continue to be seeking and searching God's truth. However, the Drag God was too campy, too human, and too underdeveloped in my own mind.

Finally, it was when I found the reading on the *trans*-God that I felt like something related back to the Divine being that I had always known and had a relationship with. God to me has morphed from expression to expression of identity, from metaphor to metaphor, because throughout this project and my own experiences with God I see little sparks of truth in every and

all model. I think Hipsher explains the process so well as an apophatic journey, there might be glimpses of truth in each image but apophatic journeys as a whole are about negating incompleteness that misleads.

God has changed and transitioned so many times in my life, and I know now each image was what I needed at the time. Regardless of if our human images are limited, God continually speaks truth, love, and divinity through them. It's the *trans*-God that transforms in my life as I continue to get to know God. One day God is comforting me like a mother and the next God has me laughing at the irony of my circumstances. God is more than one stagnant being, more than a ghost in the room watching your every move, more than an angry Father and far more than a domineering King. My God is among, and between, and around everything, always. This *trans*-God understands everyone and their circumstances, their gender, their sexuality, their race because God is a constantly transgressing what we are and what we know. We are made *imago dei*, each of us perfectly, and that is reflected in the *trans*-God.

One critique I have, or rather, a development I would make to Hipsher's *trans*-God is the necessity for a being that is capable of relationship. It's hard to have a relationship with a prefix or a verb. That follows in to a second critique of many new metaphors for God that I have found: they remain too academic. The fact that it seems like someone has to be a scholar even to grasp the basic idea of God. That's why I believe that the Christian world has gotten stuck in the male metaphors—they are simple. It doesn't take a genius to understand what a man looks and sounds like. It doesn't take an academic to understand that because our world is so patriarchal, that it just makes sense to our brains that God be a man. Men have power, power is masculine, therefore God is like a man, the transition isn't astounding. That's why, as I continue to look at and develop my own metaphor for God, I want it to be accessible.

## Conclusion

I want to be clear that the goal of bringing to light the various different versions for speaking about and to God is to enhance how people create a relationship with God. I also want to urge that the way that institutions speak about God's power can be harmful and damaging. Masculinity has so many manifestations, so many loving components but patriarchal masculinity which we see so frequently within the Church is harming it. God cannot be exclusively "him" anymore. God isn't "him" at all. I am convinced that there is a purpose to God revealing the divine name in Exodus speaks so much more truth than we have given it, "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.''" (NRSV). "I am has sent me to you" not "He has sent me to you." This is confusing characterizing "I am" is confusing and I think that is my point. At the end of the day I believe a few solutions need to happen within the Church and modern Christianity. I believe liturgies need to include more inclusive language. I believe that God should be explained in all sorts of ways, because any way is not enough, so why just get stuck with one? I believe that people should be reeducated about the reality of God and that in the Godhead we should not deify masculinity. I believe children need to be introduced to all ways about speaking about God, start in Sunday school. Teach the different verses of God as mother, nature, a woman searching for a coin, any and all of it. Finally, I believe that we need to be confused. When we think we have God all figured out that is when we are all wrong. We need to be able to be confused about the great mystery that is the divinity of God and God's transcendence over the constructs of human gender and sexual norms. If we allow ourselves to be confused and sit in the confusion and, in that, have



an experience of relationship with God regardless, and know we are made in the image of God regardless? Well, then we will finally begin to be liberated.

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